

THE ARABIAN
NIGHTS

A PLAY

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NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

ACT I

[On the stage are rolled-up carpets, piled pillows, and stacked ottomans. Hanging lamps are very low over the floor. Two members of the company enter through the audience with drums, take center stage, and begin to play. The other members of the company enter variously and prepare the stage for the play: they toss pillows into the air or to one another; they arrange the props and ottomans; they unroll the carpets. Some take up instruments and join with the drumming. The hanging lamps are raised. When everyone and everything are in place, the drumming stops, and the lights go out. In the dark we hear the sound of wind rushing over the desert—a sound generated by the company. Someone strikes a set of finger cymbals once, an action that will precede the beginning of each new story.]

CHORUS:

Once there was a king called Shahryar
Who one night found his wife in the arms of a slave;

The world darkened for him, his soul grew sick,
And he killed them both on the carpets of the bed.

[A WOMAN screams. The lights rise slowly on SHAHRYAR, with his hand pressing against the WOMAN's mouth. Or perhaps he is using the loosened end of his turban, stuffing her mouth or strangling her with it. The WAZIR is kneeling nearby, his face averted. The sound of the wind and her struggle continue under the CHORUS.]

From then on, every night
He marries, loves, and kills a virgin girl,
And when she dies, anything of him that she might have inside
Also dies. And he will never be betrayed again.

SHAHRYAR:

Friend, trust not at all in women, smile at their promising,
For they lower or they love at the caprice of their parts.
Filled to the mouth with deceit, they lavish a lying love
Even while the very fringe trimming their silks is faithless.
Mild love today tomorrow will give way to madness.
Say not, "If I might love and yet escape the follies of loving,"
But rather, "Only a miracle brings a man safe from love."

CHORUS:

This has gone on for three long years.

WAZIR:

Prince of Time, Shahryar—

SHAHRYAR:

Yes? Whom do you have for me tonight?

WAZIR:

No one, my lord.

SHAHRYAR:

What?

WAZIR:

The people are all one cry of horror. Many have fled with their remaining daughters. There are no more girls to serve for this assault.

SHAHRYAR:

Have you no daughters, my noble wazir?

WAZIR:

O Prince of Time, commander of the—

SHAHRYAR:

Faithful servant, have you no daughters? Two, I believe. Dunya—
Dunya—

WAZIR:

Dunyazade is a little child—

SHAHRYAR:

Dunyazade and Scheherezade. Two girls, I've heard, who in the matters of beauty, charm, brilliance, and perfection are unrivaled, except by each other.

WAZIR:

It is true.

SHAHRYAR:

Bring me Scheherezade tonight, and tomorrow bring her shroud.
And don't look so sad. You are about to be the father of a queen, if
only for one night.

*[The sound of the wind changes to that of morning songbirds.
SHAHRYAR continues to mutter his opening poem under his breath.
The WAZIR turns to his two daughters: SCHEHEREZADE reads a book;
DUNYAZADE is sleeping near her.]*

SCHEHEREZADE:

My father, why do you look so sad? Know, Father, that as the poet
says, "You who are sad, oh be comforted; for nothing endures, and
just as every joy vanishes away, so also vanishes every sorrow."

WAZIR:

Heart of my heart, I can't delay it any longer: you must marry our
king and die. Or else let us leave everything we have and run into
the desert.

SCHEHEREZADE:

By Allah! I will marry this king. I am—

SHAHRYAR *[muttering]*:

filled to the mouth with deceit

SCHEHEREZADE *[simultaneously]*:

filled to the mouth with stories, and I have a plan by which I will
save the daughters of the Mussulmen. And Dunyazade will help.

WAZIR:

Heart of my heart, my daughter—

SCHEHEREZADE:

Father, this is written in my destiny. Now bring me my wedding clothes, and sing me on my way.

[As the CHORUS sings the following, SCHEHEREZADE and DUNYAZADE travel to SHAHRYAR's palace on a camel led by the WAZIR. SCHEHEREZADE studies her book and whispers occasionally to DUNYAZADE, who holds a parasol over her. Some MEN sing "Allahu Ak-bar" under the others. Toward the end of the song, the sisters SCHEHEREZADE and DUNYAZADE arrive at the palace, dismount, and bid farewell to their father, who leads the camel away.]

CHORUS:

Go and be comforted, Child of the Faithful;
What he has written, that you cannot alter.
Go and be comforted, Child of the Faithful;
What he has not written, that shall never be.

I keep the sweetness of my voice to sing to him,
I keep my fairest verses in his praise.
But my voice is not sweet enough to sing of him,
My verses are too small to hold his praise.

Walk on lighthearted; care not, carry nothing.
Fear not what men do, grieve not at sorrow.
Walk on lighthearted; care not, carry nothing.
Fear not what men may do, leave all to him.

[The music stops. SHAHRYAR pulls SCHEHEREZADE to him, unsheathes his curved knife, and holds it to her throat. DUNYAZADE begins to cry. The following lines often overlap.]

SHAHRYAR:

What is that noise?

SCHEHEREZADE:

Only my sister crying, Prince of Time. She has never spent the night alone.

SHAHRYAR:

Stop her. Now!

SCHEHEREZADE:

Dunyazade, don't cry. Allah alone lives forever.

DUNYAZADE:

I know.

SCHEHEREZADE:

Someday, Dunyazade, someday in the morning or the afternoon, or in the night, you will join me. We will be together, again. Don't cry—

DUNYAZADE:

But how will I ever sleep—

SCHEHEREZADE:

Don't cry—

DUNYAZADE:

at night?

SHAHRYAR:

What's she going on about?

SCHEHEREZADE:

Nothing.

DUNYAZADE:

How will I ever sleep without your stories?

SCHEHEREZADE:

Nothing at all.

DUNYAZADE:

I'll never hear your stories again! I'll never hear about Ala al-Din or "The Contest of Generosity" or how the Madman got rid of his wife! I'll never hear the tale of "The Dream" or "The Forgotten Melody" or of Sympathy the Learned.

SHAHRYAR:

What's this?

DUNYAZADE:

Sister, your words are so sweet and gentle, pleasant to the taste.

SCHEHEREZADE:

Have mercy, she's just a little—

DUNYAZADE:

I can't sleep without—

SCHEHEREZADE:

child.

DUNYAZADE:

your stories.

SHAHRYAR [*after a pause*]:

I never sleep.

DUNYAZADE:

O Sister, tell us one of your tales of marvel. Tell it now!

SCHEHEREZADE:

Gladly, and as a duty, if the great and courteous king permits.

[*A long pause.*]

SHAHRYAR:

It is permitted.

[*The knife is still at her throat.*]

SCHEHEREZADE:

Have you heard, O auspicious king, of the great and glorious Harun al-Rashid, khalifah of Baghdad, a most wise and generous ruler—

SHAHRYAR:

Harun al-Rashid? Of course! What do you think?

SCHEHEREZADE:

Yes, well—

SHAHRYAR:

Have I heard of Harun al-Rashid? Is this all you have to say to me?

SCHEHEREZADE:

It is related that one night Harun al-Rashid felt himself weighed down by a heavy depression.

[HARUN AL-RASHID and JAFAR, his wazir, come forward. The finger cymbals chime once.]

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Brother and Wazir, my heart is heavy.

JAFAR:

O King of Time, all joy and sorrow come from within, but sometimes outside shows may have an influence upon these humors. Have you made trial of any outside shows today?

HARUN AL-RASHID:

I have taken up in my fingers and let fall all the jewels of my treasury; the rubies, the emeralds, and the sapphires, but not one of them lifted my soul to pleasure. I have been to my harem and passed in review the white and the brown, the copper colored and the dark, but none of them lifted my soul to gladness. I went to my stables, but not one of my countless horses could amuse me, and the veil of the world has not lifted.

JAFAR:

What do you say to a visit to the madhouse, my lord?

[SCHEHEREZADE slowly draws away from SHAHRYAR, whose attention is taken by the scene.]

To my way of thinking, the mad have a more subtle understanding than the sane. They behold differences and affinities which are hidden from common men and are often visited by strange visions.

SCHEHEREZADE AND HARUN AL-RASHID:

As Allah lives,

SCHEHEREZADE:
said Harun al-Rashid,

SCHEHEREZADE AND HARUN AL-RASHID:
Let us go at once.

SCHEHEREZADE:
They left the palace and made their way to the madhouse.

[They approach the CHIEF OF KEYS, who bows. The MADMAN, in chains, sits in a corner.]

CHIEF OF KEYS:
We've had a shortage of fresh lunatics lately, my lord. I attribute the falling off to a general deterioration of intellect in all of Allah's creatures. I am pleased to say that I can show you one madman, although, I confess, he does not seem so very mad to me.

HARUN AL-RASHID *[to the MADMAN]*:
Have you been shut away for madness?

MADMAN:
As Allah lives, I am neither raving mad nor melancholy mad. I am neither an idiot nor a normally stupid person. But my adventures have been so singular that, were they written with a needle in the corner of my eye, still they would serve as a lesson to the circum-spect.

HARUN AL-RASHID:
Our ears are open, and you have all our attention.

[The finger cymbals chime once. As the MADMAN speaks, he removes his chains and puts on more formal clothing, aided by his SHOP ASSISTANT.]

MADMAN:

I am a merchant and the son of a merchant. Before I was thrown into this place, I had a shop in the market where I sold bracelets and other costly ornaments for women. This story begins when I was only sixteen years old and already had a reputation for seriousness, honesty, and chastity. I never tried to make conversation with my women customers and only spoke the necessary words of purchase and sale; I practiced the precepts of the Book and never lifted my eyes to any daughter of the Faith. Other merchants held me up as an example to their sons, for I already knew how to hold myself above desire, and I understood the proper place of women and the proper place of men. One day, as I sat reading my account book—

[The sound of a shop doorbell. A timid SLAVE GIRL enters.]

SLAVE GIRL:

Is this the shop of the noble So-and-So?

MADMAN:

It is.

SLAVE GIRL:

And are you he?

MADMAN:

I am.

SLAVE GIRL:

I have something for you.

MADMAN:

Well?

SLAVE GIRL:

It comes from my mistress, and—

MADMAN:

You may approach me, you must know the reputation of my honor.

[She approaches cautiously and hands him a note.]

SLAVE GIRL:

It comes from my mistress, and she waits the favor of an answer.

MADMAN *[reading with increasing consternation]*:

"Love has filled my soul with wine and gold . . ." . . . The black scorpions of your hair . . ." . . . Come with me to the bath, beloved, and I will . . ." What is this?

SLAVE GIRL:

It's an ode.

MADMAN:

A what?

SLAVE GIRL:

An ode. To you. It's from my mistress.

MADMAN *[angrily]*:

Who is this harlot who writes to me?

SLAVE GIRL:

She waits the favor of an answer.

MADMAN:

How dare this foul woman write to me?

[He steps forward; ominous music. He tears the note and beats the SLAVE GIRL.]

Carry this back to her! Carry this back to her, Daughter of a Thousand Shameless Horns! Carry this back to your foul mistress! Carry this back to that pimp's bastard, your mistress!

[The SLAVE GIRL runs away; the bell on the shop door rings. The music stops. The MEN, including SHAHRYAR, applaud. The SHOP ASSISTANT gathers up the torn bits of the note and hides them under a carpet.]

This happened, my lords, when I was only sixteen years old, and I tell it as an example of my virtue and purity at the time. But not to put Shaaban with Ramadan, I will only say that the months and years passed, and I became a man. I began to think it was time for me to marry a wife in the sight of Allah. And I did marry. As Allah lives, I did so.

[Extremely sensual music and drumming begin.]

One afternoon, as I was sitting reading my account book, I heard a commotion in the street. I looked up and saw a remarkable thing.

[A WOMAN veiled from head to foot enters, dancing, with an entourage of WOMEN with veiled faces. Although they are dressed